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SUBJECT: IRAN/CULTURE: SO YOU WANT TO BE A ROCK AND ROLL
STAR

¶1. (SBU) Summary: An Iranian rock band described to us on December 8-9 Tehran's "small but crazy" underground club scene, where drugs are cheap and easy to find, creative expression is at its most free, and participants are among Iran's most tech-savvy citizens. They said the regime's fierce post-election political clamp-down has not impacted the underground music scene, as the regime remains too preoccupied with political protests to go after cultural targets like rock music. The band members, though not active with the Green Movement, dismiss the regime as out of touch and certain to fall, though they also told us that a majority of Iranians remain "stuck" in a conservative, traditional, inward-looking worldview. As a result they assess that political change will only come slowly. Comment: These musicians -- astute, well-informed, and resourceful 20-somethings -- offered up an insightful glimpse into a vibrant but mostly hidden sub-culture in Iran. Their views reinforced the impression that Iranian society spans a far broader and more complex spectrum than many outside observers realize, and underscored the possibility that the regime -- though radicalizing -- remains calculating and sensible enough not to pick unnecessary fights on social issues, at least while it is engaged so desperately in trying to counter more immediate political threats. End comment.

The Ayatollahs of Rock and Rolla

¶2. SBU) ConGen Istanbul's NEA Iran Watcher and other colleagues met December 8-9, 2009 in Istanbul with an Iranian "underground" alternative rock band (please protect) called the "Yellow Dogs," after they applied to the Consulate for visas to perform a concert tour in the United States. The four band members, who enjoy a growing local and internet following, shared their perspective about life as rock musicians in an Iran beset by growing pressure on political oppositionists and widening fractures within Iranian society.

What can a poor boy do but sing for a rock and roll band?

¶3. (SBU) The four musicians, in their early twenties, were first inspired by rock music that they heard as pre-teens during the more socially tolerant Khatami presidency. They said that rock music, despite its English-language lyrics, spoke to them more viscerally about conditions they faced in Iran than traditional Persian music did. With the support of their (well-educated, professional) parents, they decided to forego more traditional Iranian academic pursuits like engineering to pursue music full-time. The self-taught musicians began performing in high-school, quickly discovering Tehran's "small but crazy" underground music scene, a scene that one band member insisted grew significantly in size and creativity after Ahmadinejad's 2005 election. They estimated that several thousand Tehran youths are die-hard alternative- and hard-rock fans who regularly

risk fines and detention to attend underground concerts and clubs, and that there are similar followings in Esfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz.

Comfortably numb

14. (SBU) The band members acknowledged that many participants in the underground scene regularly use illegal drugs (but denied any use themselves). They said drugs such as heroin and opium are easy to find and inexpensive, but are being eclipsed in popularity by amphetamines typically produced in local home-labs. They acknowledged that despite the regime's increasing radicalization in most other aspects of politics and social policy, the GoI continues to follow a progressive approach to treating drug use and abuse, for example by referring users to treatment clinics and medication rather than jail sentences.

Almost cut my hair

15. (SBU) Though their music is not overtly political or oppositionist the Yellow Dogs described the risks of playing any kind of rock and roll in Iran, recounting several occasions in 2007-8 when police raided closed-door concerts they were holding (typically in sound-proofed basements or warehouses in isolated neighborhoods). One raid led to the detention of one band member under official charges of "Satan worship". A combination of bribes and parental pleading got him released after two weeks in detention. All the band members recounted run-ins with police and Basijis over "style and clothing immoralities" including one band member's afro-style hair, which the police forced him to cut off by

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seizing his driver's license until he did so. (He did, but grew it back again.)

16. (SBU) One band-member described the underground scene as a community that offers "the most free expression" in Iran, where all political, cultural, and religious views are tolerated, and where there is a lively exchange not only of music, but art, books, photos, and other forms of artistic expression. "Even Ahmadinajed's people can come listen to our music," one told us, though he admitted few do. He added that most of his peers spend their days (when not working or playing music) just like western youth do, playing video games on Macintosh computers and Xbox game platforms, buying clothes from the Gap or Benetton, watching online TV ("Lost" and Oprah are current favorites with Iran's youth), and blogging. They told us with bemusement that they regularly play "Guitar Hero" online and beat players from the US or Europe. When they tell their online competitors that they are from Iran, the other players express shock that Iranians are allowed to use the internet -- and that they are so good at video games.

17. (SBU) The band members told us the social crackdowns on that community ebb and flow depending on whether the regime is feeling self-confident or vulnerable, as well as the degree to which the regime thinks the targeted community will comply or resist. One band member described the police as being more selective now about who they detain. Currently, he said, the regime is totally focused on trying to squash election-related protests. As one musician speculated, either the regime does not have the time to go after non-protesting young Iranians for crimes as mundane as clothing violations or loud music, or it has made a conscious decision not to do so, in order not to make more enemies than necessary among Iran's youth.

Nowhere Man

18. (SBU) The musicians described Iranian society as two main communities that are worlds apart in values and orientation. One side is made up of urban dwellers who tend to be well-educated, well-versed not only in Persian poetry and

classics but literary and artistic works from other cultures, have some informed knowledge of the outside world through television and personal travel, and want Iran to be more integrated into that world. On the other side is perhaps a majority of Iranians who are deeply religious and conservative, predominantly rural, not educated beyond high-school, tend to have read little beyond the Koran and local newspapers, and are unaware of global developments or modern technologies. "Many of them have never left Iran or even their own province; they never used a computer, never watched a foreign film, and never heard of the Beatles."

¶9. (SBU) This traditional community, because its worldview is so limited, is an easy target for the regime's anti-western, adversarial, black-and-white rhetoric. The band members acknowledged that most of these voters probably voted for Ahmadinejad, and agreed that even though Mousavi probably won the elections Ahmadinejad retains great popularity with this group. Moreover, they cautioned, if any foreign country ever attacks Iran the entire conservative community will rally behind the regime, and would probably be joined by a significant part of the more urban, westernized Iranian community too.

There's Something Happening Here

¶10. (SBU) Three of the four band members said they have not participated in the post-election protests though they sympathize with the protesters, goals. The lead singer has marched several times, explaining he could not stay home while his parents marched. The band agrees that the size and energy of the November 4 and December 7 protests confirm that the Green Movement -- though not cohesive and lacking in strong leadership -- has become a self-sustaining national movement. "The government needs to find a way to deal with these people in a peaceful way." They predicted that in coming years a new generation of leaders would emerge, university students and 20-somethings who are already campus and neighborhood leaders below the radar of national attention or security force scrutiny.

Same as the Old Boss

¶11. (SBU) The band members described former PM Mousavi as "really no different" than Ahmadinejad. They argued if

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Mousavi had been elected and allowed to take office it would have been the worst outcome for the Green Movement. They explained that Mousavi would have most likely been a team player, falling in line to support Khamenei's authority and "same old" politics, leaving the young activists of the Green Movement feeling as disappointed under a Mousavi Presidency as they had been under Khatami.

¶12. (SBU) Instead, the election fraud and Khamenei's backing of Ahmadinejad have given the Green Movement a reason to exist. "Mousavi isn't the leader anymore and it's not about elections now. They stopped asking for their votes to be counted. Now they're asking for bigger things like real freedom." Khamenei's intervention to quash election challenges also spelled the end of what had previously been a genuine acceptance by the Iranian population of the Supreme Leader's neutrality and authority. "Now most Iranians just see him as a selfish politician who only cares about staying in power."

On the Road Again

¶13. (SBU) Following the group's U.S. concert tour next spring they plan to go to Europe to promote a film in which they played an Iranian rock band: "No One Knows about Persian Cats" by Iranian film-maker Bahman Ghobadi, with a screen-play co-written by American-Iranian journalist Roxane Saberi (which she finished just before she was arrested by Iranian security services in January 2009).

¶14. (SBU) We asked if the band's popularity -- helped by a CNN interview in April 2009 and the Ghobadi film winning a Cannes Festival award in May 2009, and likely to get a boost from their forthcoming US concert tour -- might put them at greater risk when they return to Iran. They assessed not, as long as they keep their music focused on social issues rather than using it to attack the regime. They said that as long as they sing in English the regime will believe they are only singing to attract foreign audiences, and not singing to Iran's youth.

How Do You Keep the Music Playing

¶15. (SBU) The band members said they never buy music or movies anymore, given the ease of free downloads. Keeping internet connectivity is a constant challenge, however, and requires the use of proxy servers, virtual private networks, and filter-breaking software like "Freegate" -- which many Iranians visiting Turkey make a point of downloading while here rather than try to download such sensitive software from inside Iran. "We are always trying to stay connected and almost always we can." Wary of the regime's efforts to use technology to track its perceived enemies, however, the band members no longer use Facebook or other social networking sites, but still rely on Skype and carefully-worded text messages.

¶16. (SBU) The band members said they and everyone they know get news from two sources: BBC's and VOA's Persian broadcasts. But the regime is stepping up efforts to block satellite signals, they claimed, by installing massive microwave towers in several areas of Tehran and using microwave bursts to disrupt the signals. Local authorities claim the towers are for cell-phone transmission, but the musicians told us anytime they go near the towers they feel "sudden shocks", nausea and dizziness, and said most Iranians (especially pregnant women and the elderly) have learned to stay away from the towers.

Comment: These Songs of Freedom

¶17. (SBU) These astute, well-informed, and resourceful 20-something musicians offered up an insightful glimpse -- which we find credible -- into a vibrant but mostly hidden sub-culture in Iran, reinforcing the impression that Iranian society spans a far broader and more complex spectrum than many outside observers realize. We also find credible their description of the regime's treatment of their lifestyle and activities and their general conclusion that the regime is currently too overloaded trying to squash overt political protests and opposition to care about less-political, counter-culture "threats" like rock music. Despite its radicalization, the regime appears still calculating and sensible enough not to pick domestic, social fights it doesn't have to, at least while it is engaged so desperately in fighting more immediate political threats. In such an environment, the band is optimistic that the underground rock

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scene in Iran -- and the niche arena of free, creative expression it provides -- will keep growing. End comment.
WIENER